

Punctuation

BASICS: WHY DO WE NEED IT?

SUNY POTSDAM COLLEGE WRITERS' BLOCK

COMMON MISTAKES

Without punctuation, the meaning of your sentence can get lost. Proper comma and period use keeps ideas clear. Improper use creates run-ons, fragments, and comma splices.

Run-ons:

You know when one sentence starts to blur into another and you don't catch it as you write but it's important to try to avoid it in your final paper? That's an example of a run-on. The correction: *You know when one sentence starts to blur into another? You don't catch it as you write, but it's important to try to avoid it in your final paper.* Having two distinct sentences makes it clearer.

Run-on: I hate rainy days they make campus seem like one big puddle.

Correction: I hate rainy days. They make campus seem like one big puddle.

Fragments:

I worked for six hours straight. Which was too long. The first part is fine. The second is a fragment. The correction: *I worked for six hours straight, which was too long.* The second part can't stand on its own, so connecting it to the first makes a single, complete thought.

Fragment: Squirrels keep stealing from my birdfeeder. I hate.

Correction: Squirrels keep stealing from my birdfeeder. I hate squirrels.

Comma splices:

I don't like dogs, they scare me. These are two separate thoughts, but the comma ties them together. Comma splices are commas put where periods, conjunctions, or colons should be. The correction: *I don't like dogs. They scare me.* Or: *I don't like dogs because they scare me.* Or: *I don't like dogs: they scare me.*

Comma splice: My class is cancelled on Friday, I want to sleep in.

Correction: My class is cancelled on Friday, so I want to sleep in.

Why does this matter?

When you turn in an assignment with punctuation errors, your teacher may have to reread to understand your meaning. And your teacher wants to understand your meaning, to see how you create a point, support it, and express it clearly. For your teacher to really follow your meaning well, good punctuation is key. So in your final editing, *after you've clarified your main points*, fix your punctuation carefully. (In other words, don't worry about punctuation before you've finished clarification.) Punctuation mistakes make it hard for teachers to see what you can really do. Unfortunately, some might take it as a sign that you don't care or didn't try.

How do I recognize mistakes?

Easy.

READ!

A lot of students write something and turn it in "hot off the presses." Papers have a lot of tiny errors at this stage, but students don't see them, for one main reason: they don't take time to proofread their work. It's not your teacher's job to correct your punctuation. That's your responsibility. Proofreading even once will let you find run-ons and fragments and correct them.

A FEW RULES TO FOLLOW:

1. use a comma after lead-in phrase or introductory element;

Introductory elements start off with words like when, since, although. Ex. **When I was a kid**, I had a great dog.

2. use a comma with a FANBOYS conjunction to join two complete sentences;

FANBOYS: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So. In college writing, your sentences need to be complex. Conjunctions like FANBOYS help you produce clear, complex sentences. Ex. My dog's name was Hooch, **and** he was really sweet.

3. avoid and correct sentence fragments;

For this rule, read carefully to make sure each sentence has both a subject and verb, so it can stand on its own. Watch for sentences that start with "which" or "because."

nonessential information: use two commas to set off extra information in the middle of a sentence (Purdue);

If you want to explain something within a sentence, you can set the information aside using two commas. Ex. Hooch, **a big yellow lab**, slept more than any dog my family ever had. That Hooch was a big yellow lab is extra information in this sentence, but since it's offset by two commas, the sentence still makes sense.

4. **appositive: use a comma to set off extra information at the end of the sentence (Purdue).**

Similar to having extra information in the middle of the sentence, but here you only need one comma. Ex. Hooch was scared of thunderstorms, **which were loud and chaotic**.

Punctuating Quotations

Putting punctuation around quotes can be confusing. Here's a breakdown of where the punctuation goes for quotations that don't need to be cited:

Commas

- After a verb like say, shout, explain, the comma goes after the verb and before the quote. Ex. Felicia explained, "We'll leave the house at 5pm." Josh looked up from his book and said, "that's great."

Periods

- Periods go inside the quotation mark. Ex. Max was energetic when he heard the teacher say, "class dismissed."

Punctuating Citations

Quotes that need citations are a little different:

Commas

- Commas go **inside the quotation mark** when you're citing something. Ex. Scientists found "eye color is hereditary" (Cite Source Here).

Periods

- Periods go **outside the quotation mark**, after the actual citation. Ex. Scientists found "eye color is hereditary" (Cite Source Here).

NEED TO REVIEW?

This is just an overview of punctuation rules. If you want to go more in-depth, check out these resources. They should take less than 30 minutes to read:

- Points 1-11 from [Purdue Owl](#)
- When to use a comma from [Writers' Block](#)
- Purdue OWL Comma [Overview](#)

Here are some helpful videos, which could take less than ten minutes to watch:

- James' video on ["Writing Skills: When to use commas."](#) If you're very confident about commas, start at 5:30.

- Christine Hartjes on ["Commas."](#) Start at 6:00 to learn about comma after introductory element. View the earlier part if you want to review using FANBOYS conjunctions more.

- Smrt English on ["Sentence Fragments."](#)

PRACTICE

Put a comma in the right spot. (Hint: Look for FANBOYS.)

1. She doesn't go home for school breaks so she has the room all to herself.
2. You know the basics but you have a lot of work to do to become a pro.
3. I do not snore or talk in my sleep!

Put two commas in the right spots. (Hint: Look for introductory elements and extra information.)

1. Despite the heat Andrew wore a sweatshirt which made him too warm.
2. When my aunt was little she hated shopping especially for fancy clothes.
3. He loved that Felix the neighbor's cat came over to visit every day.

Circle any comma splices.

1. My name is Jake, I'm the leader of the band.
2. Dan, Phil, and Larry all have pets, I don't have any pets.
3. Although he saw the light turning yellow, Gabe pressed harder on the gas, he almost gave me a heart attack.

Underline any fragments.

1. I saw it. The green bag.
2. My favorite. My mom made cinnamon rolls.
3. The bird wanted to fly away. The birdcage kept it in.

Put the punctuation (comma and period) in the right place.

1. Billy said "I hate you"
2. "My name is Joe" said Little Joe
3. According to the textbook "there are three basic kinds of rock" (123)